

## **DO NEWS MEDIA HAVE A SOCIAL ROLE? A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF NEWS REPORTING ON NATIONAL DISASTERS**

Joye, Stijn

Ghent University, Belgium

While most scholarly work within the field of disaster news studies focus on the traditional informative role of news media, an emergent strand of research occupies itself with the important social role that media can play in the aftermath of a disaster. This refers to the emotional or therapeutic function of media during a crisis situation given that the media-audience relationship is then motivated more by the people's need for emotional support, companionship, and community ties, than for their need for official information (Perez-Lugo, 2004). Scholars such as Wayment (2004), Kitch and Hume (2007), and Pantti and Sumiala (2009) all underline the vital role of media as a public forum for collective acts of mourning that draw on a sense of (national) unity and community, solidarity and identification. News media provide support and condolences to affected people as well as to the broader community.

Applying Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper investigates the social role that Belgian news media have taken up in the aftermath of the recent Sierre bus crash. In March 2012, 22 Belgian children, four supervisors and two bus drivers died in a bus crash in a tunnel in Sierre (Switzerland) while 24 children were seriously injured. The dramatic crash dominated the Belgian news media for weeks and months thereafter. In reporting on what was immediately identified as a 'national' disaster, the intense news coverage revealed a particular dynamic compared to the coverage of international disaster events. Our findings confirm a dominant social role that is articulated through an emotional discourse alongside a discourse of unity and community. Discursive journalistic strategies included a strong focus on emotional testimonies and eyewitness accounts which raised feelings of identification and compassion. Other practices explicitly referred to the imagining of a unified community by the use of inclusive language and specific images which is important in the process of rehabilitating a distorted society.

This study argues that it is through processes of media representations that individual experiences and emotions of suffering and grief become collective and political.

### **Keywords**

news reporting on disasters, suffering, social role of news media, Sierre bus crash, critical discourse analysis